



[Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 \(part one\)](#)

The boar and the pig as symbols of Rome

Date: 5th CE

Place: Syria Palaestina

Language: Hebrew

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Midrash

Title of work: Leviticus Rabbah

Reference: 13:5

Commentary:

This section is part of a larger midrashic unit (Leviticus Rabbah 13:5) that elaborates on the theme of the four kingdoms, based on different biblical verses (for more about the structure of this chapter of the midrash, and this unit particularly, see Har-Peled, *The Dialogical Beast*, p. 157-160). Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 opens with the statement that all the prophets saw the course of the four kingdoms that would subdue Israel and their affairs. Yet, the midrash only lists four biblical figures who viewed these four kingdoms: Adam, Abraham, Daniel, and Moses. Interestingly, at the very least Adam and Abraham are not usually considered prophets in rabbinic literature (the question of whether Daniel was considered a prophet is debated). The four kingdoms model follows the famous vision of Daniel (7:2-7). The last kingdom will be the worst oppressor, but also the final one, as deliverance will come with its fall. It is not clear when the fourth beast of Daniel, which originally symbolized the Hellenistic kingdoms, was transformed to signify Rome. We can find this identification already implied by Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* X.210). In tannaitic compositions, we find the identification of Rome with the fourth Kingdom in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael [be-?odesh \(Yitro\), parasha 8](#) (Horovitz-Rabin edition, p. 236). This midrash, which is very similar to what we find in Leviticus Rabbah, presents the idea that Abraham saw the four kingdoms. However, Leviticus Rabbah develops this tannaitic midrash much further, adding additional identification: the pig or the boar, both called *?azir* in Hebrew, signify Rome. This association cannot be found in tannaitic texts, and therefore the questions are whether it originated in and whether it was related to the Christianization of the Roman Empire.

Although no tannaitic text mentions this link, Mireille Hadas-Lebel dates it as early as the second century CE, based on a teaching attributed to a tanna in Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 118b (given as 188b by the author, but this is a mistake as no such reference exists; the editing process of the Bavli continued well after the fifth century) and on a gloss in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* A 34 (the date of this work is debated, but it probably continued to be edited as late as the seventh or eighth century), and the time of the sages mentioned in Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah (*Jerusalem against Rome*, p. 517-521; see also Herr, *Roman Rule*, p. 128, for a second century dating of this identification). Jonah Fraenkel, based on the date of Rabbi Simon, who was active in the third century, and whose teaching is cited in Section G, dated the identification of the pig with Rome to the time of this sage (*Darkhei ha-Agadah*, vol. I, p. 219). In my opinion, it is problematic to interpret from these late texts that the tannaim already identified the *?azir* with Rome (see also Har-Peled, *The Dialogical Beast*, p. 216). However, while the association of the pig or the boar with Rome is absent from tannaitic compositions, it appears in the [Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 4:1, 7b; Taanit 4:6, 68c](#). Here, the Romans who besieged Jerusalem did not hold to their agreement with the Jews inside the city, and instead of lambs for the *Tamid* offering, the besiegers gave two pigs. Yet, even in this narrative, there is no explicit statement (as appears in Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah) that the swine symbolizes Rome. Jacob Neusner explains the identification of Rome with the swine as leveled against Christianity, writing that: "Rome is represented as only Christian Rome can have been represented: it looks kosher but it is unkosher" (he also brings a passage from Jerome, *Tractates on Psalms* 95.2, who identified the pig with the Jews to support this claim; *Judaism and Christianity*, p. 102). In response, Misgav Har-Peled asks "If the *midrash* represents the subtext of the dominated and it indeed targets Christianized Rome, why does it not directly point to it?" (*The Dialogical Beast*, p. 169). However, he suggests that "The identification of Esau with the boar of Psalm 80:14 was established before the end of the fourth century CE. [...] In *Leviticus Rabbah* (4th-5th cent.), the equation 'Rome = Esau = the fourth kingdom = the pig = the boar out of the wood' appeared in its complete, fully developed form" (*The Dialogical Beast*, p. 220). Let us now return to Leviticus Rabbah.

Although the entire midrashic unit (Leviticus Rabbah 13:5) is pertinent for the discussion of rabbinic perceptions of Rome, for now, we will only discuss passages that include the identification of Rome with the *?azir*, namely the pig



or the boar (see also [part two](#) and [part three](#)). The passage discussed here is based on the list of animals that Israelites are prohibited from eating as appears in Deuteronomy 14:

“(3) You shall not eat any abhorrent thing. (4) These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, (5) the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain-sheep. (6) Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof cleft in two, and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. (7) Yet of those that chew the cud or have the hoof cleft you shall not eat these: the camel, the hare, and the rock badger, because they chew the cud but do not divide the hoof; they are unclean for you. (8) And the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. You shall not eat their meat, and you shall not touch their carcasses” (Deuteronomy 14:3-8, NRSV).

As Deuteronomy is attributed to Moses, the midrash uses this list that includes four unclean animals as signifying the four kingdoms that Moses viewed. Sections A to D use verse seven to discuss the first three kingdoms. The second part that includes Sections E to F and uses verse eight is much more elaborate, and dedicated to the final kingdom, Rome. Section B states that the camel signifies Babylonia building on the sound affinity between the word “camel” (*gamal* in Hebrew) and two words in Psalms 137:8 which have the same root *g-m-l*: “O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you your payment (*gmulekh*) for what you have done (*gamalt*) to us!” (Psalms 137:8, based on NRSV).

According to Section C, the rock badger (*shafan* in Hebrew) symbolizes Media. Two different explanations are provided, based on the description of this animal as having both signs of purity and impurity (it “chew[s] the cud but do[es] not divide the hoof”; Deuteronomy 14:7). First, “our rabbis” offer that “Media (*maday*) produced (*me’amedet*) a righteous man and a wicked man.” Based on other midrashim, Mordecai Margulies has suggested that the pious man is Cyrus, whereas the evil one is Ahasuerus (*Midrash*, p. 190; cf. Genesis Rabbah 44:15, Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 437). Second, Rabbi Yehudah, son of Rabbi Simon, a fourth-generation amora who was active in the first half of the fourth century, explains that this mix of purity and impurity signs for Media refers to King Darius, Esther’s son who was pure from his mother’s side and impure from his father Ahasuerus’s side. Section D links the hare (*arnevet* in Hebrew) to Greece. This association is based on the claim that the name of the Hellenistic king Ptolemy’s mother was Arnevet (perhaps referring to the Greek name of this animal; see Har-Peled, *The Dialogical Beast*, p. 160).

The midrash dedicates much more attention to the fourth kingdom, Rome. In Section E, it states that the *?azir*, which is the Hebrew word for swine or boar, symbolizes Edom, which like Esau typically refers to the Roman Empire (including its later Christian phase) and sometimes to Christianity itself (see Bakhos, ‘Figuring [out] Esau’; an association between Esau or Edom with a boar or swine can also be found in 1 Enoch 89:12 and *Jubilees* 37:20, 24). While the words Esau and Edom are linked in the Hebrew Bible, scholars debate when these two words became synonyms for Rome (for more on this question and the different scholarly opinions, see Har-Peled, *The Dialogical Beast*, p. 215-216). It is clear, however, that in our midrash the words “Esau” and “swine/boar” (*?azir*) refer to Rome. In Section F, the midrash inquires about the fact that these three animals appear in one verse, whereas the pig receives an entire verse for itself, citing two sages on this issue: Rabbi Yo?anan and Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish, both second generation amoraim who were active in the third century. Rabbi Yo?anan explains that Rome is equal to the three other kingdoms combined (probably referring to the hardships of Rome’s rule). For Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish, Rome’s reign is harsher than that of these three empires together.

Section G starts with the statement attributed to Rabbi Simon (a second or third generation amora who was active in the third century) cited by Rabbi Pin?as and Rabbi ?ilqiya (both fourth-generation amoraim who were active in first half of the fourth century). According to this teaching, only two prophets exposed Rome, or perhaps her wickedness, by using the word “*?azir*.” First, in the first verse of Psalms 80 we read: “A Testimony of Asaph: A Psalm,” with the image of the boar following in verse 14 (13 in most Christian Bibles): “The boar (*?azir*) from the forest ate (lit. nibbled at) her.” This is interpreted as Rome submitting Israel. It is significant that the third century midrash Sifre Deuteronomy (317, Finkelstein edition, p. 359) uses this verse without associating the boar with Rome, but with the four kingdoms together (compare Schremer, *Brother Estranged*, p. 174-175, note 175; Har-Peled, *The Dialogical Beast*, p. 173-174). It seems, therefore, that the reading of this verse in relation to Rome, and perhaps also the explicit claim that the pig or the boar symbolizes Rome can be first traced in rabbinic compositions from the fifth century, starting with Genesis Rabbah (such as [65:1](#) discussed below). In addition to Psalms 80:14, it is claimed that “*?azir*” was mentioned by Moses in the Torah in a discussion of pure and impure animals.

After citing the two prophets that mentioned the *?azir* as a symbol of Rome, the midrash continues to ask why



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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Abraham](#)
- [Adam](#)
- [Ahasuerus](#)
- [Babylon](#)
- [boar](#)
- [Caesarea Maritima](#)
- [camel](#)
- [Christianity](#)
- [cud](#)
- [Cyrus](#)
- [Daniel](#)
- [Darius](#)
- [Edom](#)
- [Esau](#)
- [Esther](#)
- [four kingdoms](#)
- [fourth empire](#)
- [hare](#)
- [Hellenistic kingdoms](#)



- [hoof](#)
- [hypocrisy](#)
- [Isaac](#)
- [Jerome](#)
- [Jerusalem](#)
- [Media](#)
- [Moses](#)
- [pig](#)
- [prophet](#)
- [Ptolemy](#)
- [pure animals](#)
- [Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish](#)
- [Rabbi Simon](#)
- [Rabbi Yohanan](#)
- [rock badger](#)
- [Roman governor](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman legal system](#)
- [Roman rule](#)
- [swine](#)
- [unclean animals](#)

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[Genesis Rabbah 65:1](#)

The boar and the pig as symbols of Rome (in the context of Esau's marriage)

- [Read more about Genesis Rabbah 65:1](#)

Text

[Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 \(part two\)](#)

The pig as a symbol of Rome

- [Read more about Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 \(part two\)](#)

Text



[Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 \(part three\)](#)

The pig as a symbol of Rome

- [Read more about Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 \(part three\)](#)

Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 4:3, 8a; Taanit 2:2, 65c](#)

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 4:3, 8a; Taanit 2:2, 65c](#)

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